

Implementing Rapid Reflection Forces

When it comes to Rapid Reflection Forces, *Électricité de France* has decided to act. **Pierre Bérroux, Xavier Guilhou** and **Patrick Lagadec** describe how such a force was put at the disposal of the EDF's crisis director in two different exercises, one involving a flu pandemic, the other a nuclear crisis

CRISIS MANAGEMENT HAS its well-known textbook concepts and operational techniques. Emergency response on the ground focuses on fast operational reaction. An Emergency Operations Centre (EOM), in a core position, has the overall responsibility for the response. Its major components are: crisis rooms, crisis teams, crisis leadership and crisis communication. The whole has a clear mission: rapid, coherent and effective response. Crisis training (from advanced simulations to post-crisis analyses) is developed with the aim of consolidating the best overall efficiency. The watchword is 'response' – fast and pragmatic. There is no time to 'reinvent the wheel', you just apply the techniques you know, the check-lists you have and liaise with the people in charge.

INSUFFICIENT

All that is still necessary, but far from sufficient. Furthermore, the mutations we are witnessing in the risk and crisis arena call for mutations in our most fundamental crisis management paradigms and grammar, in our crisis organisations and tools. The usual 'one way top-down rush response' is no longer the undisputable logic to be followed.

A chaotic environment is becoming the name of the game in crisis management (*CRJ passim*). Applying usual responses, ever faster than before, is not adequate, and can be counter-productive. In such 'barbarous' environments, even the most capable frontline players tend to be stunned and completely disoriented – you can rush headlong into the fray, but it does not work. And you discover an essential law: when you are one war too late, fiasco is just around the corner. The first and foremost step does not come naturally, taking the time to ask the question: What is the hidden side of the problem?

But in general, crisis teams and crisis



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leaders do not have that much time to devote to questions beyond technical execution and to resetting the compass. Hence, we have come up with the concept of the 'Rapid Reflection Force' (RRF), to complement the usual 'Rapid Deployment Forces'. A dedicated team is set up, with two functions: To focus on the 'unthinkable' – unthinkable difficulties and unthinkable responses; and to produce specific and clear analyses and proposals for decision-makers.

To break down complexity and fuzziness, to restore a number of solid and shared references, four seminal questions are to be explored, systematically and throughout the whole crisis:

■ What is the essence of the problem?

Usually, people rush into a problem without really understanding the complexities of the situation. For example, one could say a Category-5 hurricane is not just 'another' hurricane; it is an 'outside the box' disaster. The challenge is to clarify what the situation is really about, beyond the 'knee-jerk' perceptions. And this question

must not be asked just once, but repeatedly throughout the crisis.

■ **What are the key pitfalls?** Generally, fear and stress generate instant collapse and lead to poor choices and devastating media communication. This is easily understandable but must be kept in check. To avoid an instant quagmire, the question 'what are the key mistakes to avoid?' must be asked again and again, throughout the crisis and right until the very end, even in the post-crisis period. One such pitfall may be how the organisation works on the issue, internally and externally, which calls for a systematic screening of architectural, leadership, communication and network dimensions.

■ **Who are the stakeholders?** Unconventional crises cannot be solved solely by and with conventional players. Commonly, crisis managers tend to work with those very few who are well known to them. During an inconceivable event decision-makers must broaden and redefine their networks, beyond familiar frontiers.

■ **Which strategic initiatives are vital?** It is essential to restore meaning, to re-establish balance, and to initiate powerful new dynamics. The way to do this is to launch a number of highly specific initiatives, *with a number* of specific people, at the right moment. This is perhaps the most difficult challenge: to identify and define one, two or three specific actions that the team can implement to inject confidence, positive dynamics, and movement.

DIRECT SUPPORT

But the goal is not to produce some theoretical report after the event. The RRF has to be a direct support to the crisis director himself or herself, in real time. That implies two prerequisites: opening outside the box questions, clarifying very specific analyses and suggestions to be presented at on the spot request to the top leader – rapidly

and concisely. The RRF has to be operational at any moment to respond to the leader on these questions: What is your vision of the issue and what are your operational suggestions?

The concept is one thing, but the real issue is implementation. Under the authority and decisive impetus of Pierre Bérroux, Senior Vice-President, Corporate Risk Management Division, Électricité de France, has decided to act. A Rapid Reflection Force was put at the disposal of the crisis director at the highest level in two different exercises: a flu pandemic severe crisis; and on a nuclear crisis exercise. Lessons learned are:

■ **Choosing a group of people:** The first step is to set up a special team that is capable of asking fresh questions, of finding fresh approaches and of working diligently on them in a highly creative manner. This is not so much 'technicians' or high ranking people, but people who are happy to question outside the box, to wander in uncharted waters. Two cultures have to be mixed and knitted together. The 'artists', open to a host of unfamiliar radar screens; and the 'doers' are able to capture and translate intuitions into concrete suggestions, and in a language and form that decision-makers pressed by the crisis can easily understand, absorb and act upon.

■ **Training them:** The crucial message is to be happy to sail uncharted waters together. The usual mood in crisis teams is more 'defensive' than 'creative'. Any person chosen to be involved in an RRF has to be prepared for the unthinkable, to avoid instant paralysis, and to be able to react positively; furthermore, to be able to liaise inventively with the people inside and outside the group. If people know each other, it is obviously better, but the key is not so much to know each other as to feel comfortable when confronted with unthinkable situations.

■ **Steering the group:** To lead such a group requires special people skills: the 'artists' have to feel totally free and encouraged to be creative, and the 'doers' have to feel stimulated by the challenge to translate very unconventional readings and impressions into very specific proposals. This requires the ability to match the widest variety of visions and the best focused proposals. And the person at the helm will generally have the responsibility to speak to the crisis director, who must be very concise, persuasive, but not overstep his/her role: he or she is not the leader. He or she also has to look at the 'freshness' of the RRF: wandering in barbarous lands is very tiring; energy management is essential.

■ **Knitting the RRF with the crisis team, and especially with the crisis director:** This requires some preparation between the top management and the RRF. The crucial points

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are: clarification of the roles, and especially the fact that the RRF is there to help, certainly not to take over; clarification of how to interact: leaders can clarify the RRF game-plan rules. But the real test is the reality test: the top management will accept it has discovered its effective value. In other words, when the leader says: "If you have anything to tell me, now is the time to say it". Then, the RRF has to come up with the goods, and it must be convincing.

UNCONVENTIONAL CRISES

EDF launched this initiative over the past few months. A first seminar was organised to work with a group of potential members of an RRF; the half-day meeting was focused on unconventional crises and the new grammars to be followed to handle these crises. Then a second half-


day meeting was used to train people to work themselves on specific scenarios as if they were an RRF. In September 2006, a group of people was chosen to act as the RRF for a flu pandemic exercise; in October, much the same group of people was convened to act in a nuclear simulation exercise.

The main contribution of the RRF was as follows. Whistle blowing on the organisational architecture of the crisis centre was one issue that arose. In one instance, the crisis leader had been absorbed by the operational group, which is a regular pitfall in crises. The leader immediately appointed someone to lead the 'operations room' and moved to the dedicated 'CEO room' so as to better play a strategic global role.

Detecting the widening gap between, on the one hand, the technical management of the accident by some, the administrative and political management of the crisis by others, the obsession with classic communication tactics by others, and, on the other hand, the fast moving social and media reaction. The RRF helped to pinpoint the gap, to redesign the stance of the company, to change the communication policy.

It was important to suggest various creative moves. For instance, in the pandemic simulation, the situation developed in such a way that a central leadership became irrelevant. It was so serious that the only way to restore some common reference was to act directly from the bottom up, and not via a usual Command and Control approach. This led to a sweeping change in the company's policy and action.

It was increasingly irrelevant to have everything said and done from Paris; the CEO had to go directly into the field. In the nuclear simulation, it rapidly transpired that bold initiatives had to be taken with a host of new stakeholders, including NGOs and media. At an international level, the usual network, which combines central government bodies, national media and regional authorities, was overwhelmed. Furthermore, it was imperative to go outside usual frameworks to avoid global collapse.

The road is wide open. The concept has been tested, the operational benchmarks have been clarified. Now we must get down to work. 

Background Reading

Dr Patrick Lagadec has written several articles for Crisis Response Journal on the need for new intellectual strategies to evolve in order to handle today's complex, fuzzy, inconceivable and fragmented threats and challenges. Now that EDF has tested the Rapid Reflection Forces concept in two exercises, other major organisations are sure to follow suit.



"Crossing the Rubicon"
(vol 1, issue 3)

"The borderline of chaos"
(vol 2, issue 3)



"Complexity and chaos"
(vol 3, issue 1)

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